

JEAN-PAUL JÉRÔME



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Jean-Paul Jérôme

In February 1955, the *Manifeste des Plasticiens* was launched at the Montreal restaurant L'Échourie, and subsequently published on March 19 in the newspaper *L'Autorité du peuple*. Jean-Paul Jérôme was, with Rodolphe de Repentigny (who signed his pictures under the pseudonym of Jauran), Louis Belzile and Fernand Toupin, one of the four signatories. It declared:

As suggested by the name they have chosen for their group, the *Plasticiens* devote themselves in their work, before anything else, to the plastic elements: colour, texture, form, line, ultimate unity of the picture as such, and the relationship between these elements. Elements assumed as an end in themselves.

By the same token, the *Plasticiens* were distancing themselves from the Automatists, for whom the "plastic elements" were not "assumed as an end in themselves", but rather were conceived as the means to have access to the inner world of the mind. The *Plasticiens* were not however to keep this austere – almost grammatical – formalist position for very long. De Repentigny was tempted by photography; Belzile would turn to figuration for a brief period; Toupin, following in the footsteps of poet Gaston Miron, adopted a heavily textured surface to express his deep-rootedness in the land of Quebec.

The year after the launching of the *Manifeste des Plasticiens*, Jean-René Ostiguy, then curator at the National Gallery of Canada, asked Paul-Émile Borduas whether he thought painting "where the picture will have nothing to do in its means or ends with the visible exterior world" will inaugurate "a new form of pictorial art"? Clearly, he was thinking of the *Manifeste's* extreme formalist declarations quoted above. Borduas' answer is interesting: "Lines, forms and colours with no profound justification in the external world would be powerless to express the psyche". (Free translation from André-G. Bourassa, Jean Fisette et Gilles Lapointe, *Paul-Émile Borduas. Écrits I*, Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1987, p. 533). Borduas was referring to his own painting, but he was describing, without realizing it, the subsequent evolution of the first *Plasticiens*.

In September 1956, Jérôme left Montreal for Paris, where he would stay until November 1958. During that time, he met Jean-Michel Atlan (1913 – 1960), a French painter born in Algeria, Martin Barré (1924 – 1993) and Richard Mortensen (1910 – 1993), a Danish painter living in Paris after the war. These contacts would detach him from an overly simplistic form of geometry and encourage him to more and more complexity in his painting. Atlan had written in 1950:

The forms that seem to us today the most promising, as much for their plastic organization as for their expressive intensity, are, to speak properly, neither abstract nor figurative. They take part in these cosmic powers of *metamorphosis* where one encounters the real adventure. (From there, emerge forms which are themselves and something else, birds and cactus, abstraction and new figuration). (*Cobra*, no 6, April 1950, p. 16).

Is it to more intensely pursue this adventure in this in-between world that Jérôme, after returning to Quebec, works solitarily? His work remained resolutely abstract, but resisted the geometric exclusiveness of a Guido Molinari (the famous vertical stripes) or of a Claude Tousignant (the no less famous targets named *Accélérateurs chromatiques*). Jérôme was also interested in biomorphic shapes, nearer to life, more suitable "to express the psyche", to use the words of Borduas. Additionally, he always remained attracted by the idea of a synthesis of many elements, issued from the most varied horizons, including the forms of nature, unified in a rigorous composition, respectful of the pictorial surface. This is what he was telling Richard Barbeau in an interview:

A painting is, of course, a passing moment. One has to seize the moment, but to do it with a sort of synthesis in which an emotion is not described only from the visual point of view. I like painting to portray all my experience: the desire for adventure, the desire of the unknown. (*Jean-Paul Jérôme: The Modernist Vibrations*, Rivière-du-Loup: Musée du Bas-Saint-Laurent, 2001, p. 29)

In fact, his work is literally inexhaustible. Galerie D'Este gives us today the opportunity to see a nice retrospective of his work, with a particular focus on the last period, which is less known, but remarkably close to his first *Plasticien* paintings. Jérôme's achievements are noticeably even and of high quality. Here is a painter to which, maybe a little by his own fault, we have not given all due attention. It is time to repair this injustice and to give him the place that he deserves not only in the *Plasticien* movement but in Canadian painting.

François-Marc Gagnon

Dr. François-Marc Gagnon is the Director and Chair of the Gail and Stephen A. Jarislowsky Institute for Studies in Canadian Art. Dr. Gagnon is internationally recognized as an outstanding senior scholar in Canadian visual culture. In 1999, he received the Order of Canada. He taught at the Université de Montréal for thirty-five years and was also a lecturer in Concordia's graduate art history program. Dr. Gagnon is a prolific researcher and has received the Governor General's Award for his 1978 critical biography of Paul-Émile Borduas.

Jean-Paul Jérôme

C'est en février 1955 que le *Manifeste des Plasticiens* était lancé au restaurant l'Échourie, puis publié le 19 mars suivant dans le Journal *L'Autorité du peuple*. Jean-Paul Jérôme en était l'un des quatre signataires, avec Rodolphe de Repentigny (qui signait ses tableaux Jauran), Louis Belzile et Fernand Toupin. On y déclarait :

Comme le nom qu'ils ont choisi pour leur groupe l'indique, les Plasticiens s'attachent avant tout, dans leur travail, aux faits plastiques : ton, texture, formes, lignes, unité finale qu'est le tableau, et le rapport entre ces éléments. Éléments assumés comme fins.

Ils se trouvaient du même coup à prendre leur distance avec l'automatisme, pour qui les « faits plastiques » restaient tout de même au service d'une révélation du monde intérieur de l'artiste et n'étaient pas « assumés comme fins ». Ils ne devaient pas s'en tenir cependant très longtemps à cette position formaliste, grammaticale pour ainsi dire. De Repentigny ira vers la photographie; Belzile sera tenté un temps par la figuration; Toupin, sur les traces du poète Gaston Miron, sentira le besoin d'incarner son sentiment national dans une matière plus texturée.

Borduas avait d'ailleurs répondu l'année suivante (avril 1956) à Jean-René Ostiguy – celui-ci ayant évidemment en vue les déclarations très formalistes du *Manifeste des Plasticiens* – s'il croyait qu'une peinture qui « n'aurait plus rien à voir ni dans ses moyens, ni dans ses fins avec les apparences visibles du monde extérieur » inaugurerait une « forme nouvelle de l'art pictural » : « Des lignes, des formes et des couleurs qui n'auraient pas de justifications profondes avec le monde extérieur seraient impuissantes à exprimer le psychisme. » (André-G. Bourassa, Jean Fisette et Gilles Lapointe, *Paul-Émile Borduas. Écrits I*, Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1987, p. 533). Borduas décrivait ainsi sa propre peinture et se trouvait à définir sans le savoir l'évolution subséquente des premiers plasticiens.

En septembre 1956, Jérôme quittait Montréal pour Paris, où il allait séjourner jusqu'en novembre 1958. Il y fit la connaissance de Jean-Michel Atlan (1913 – 1960), peintre français d'origine algérienne, de Martin Barré (1924-1993) et de Richard Mortensen (1910 - 1993), peintre danois venu habiter en France après la guerre. Ces contacts le détachent d'un géométrisme simplificateur et l'encourage à une peinture d'une complexité grandissante. C'est Atlan qui avait écrit en 1950 :

Les formes qui nous paraissent aujourd'hui les plus valables, tant par leur organisation plastique que par leur intensité expressive, ne sont à proprement parler ni abstraites ni figuratives. Elles participent précisément à ces puissances cosmiques de la *métamorphose* où se situe la véritable aventure. (D'où surgissent des formes qui sont elles-mêmes et autre chose qu'elles-mêmes, oiseaux et cactus, abstraction et nouvelle figuration). (*Cobra*, no 6, avril 1950, p. 16).

Est-ce pour poursuivre plus intensément cette incursion dans ce monde intermédiaire qu'à son retour au Québec, Jérôme travaille en solitaire? Son œuvre reste résolument abstraite, mais résiste à l'exclusive géométrique radicale d'un Guido Molinari (les fameuses bandes verticales) ou d'un Claude Tousignant (les non moins fameuses cibles dites « Accélérateurs chromatiques »), pour explorer des formes biomorphiques plus proches de la vie, plus susceptibles d'« exprimer le psychisme », aurait dit Borduas. Jérôme tente toujours au contraire de faire la synthèse de multiples éléments, venus d'horizons des plus divers, y compris de la nature, dans une composition rigoureuse, respectueuse de la surface picturale. C'est ce qu'il affirmait dans une conversation avec Richard Barbeau.

La peinture est (...) un moment qui passe. Il faut le saisir, mais il faut en faire une sorte de synthèse dans laquelle on ne décrit pas seulement visuellement une émotion. J'aime bien que le champ de la peinture résume tous mes acquis : le désir de l'aventure, le désir de tout ce que je ne connais pas. (*Jean-Paul Jérôme : Les vibrations modernes*, Rivière-du-Loup : Musée du Bas-Saint-Laurent, 2001, p. 29)

Aussi bien, son œuvre est à la lettre inépuisable. La Galerie D'Este nous offre aujourd'hui la possibilité de voir une belle rétrospective de son œuvre, et de nous familiariser avec les œuvres de la dernière période, moins connues, mais remarquablement proches de ses premiers tableaux plasticiens. Jérôme s'y affirme égal à lui-même. Voilà un peintre de qualité à qui, un peu par sa faute peut-être, on n'a pas porté toute l'attention que l'on devrait. Il est temps de réparer cette injustice et de lui rendre la place qui lui est due non seulement dans le mouvement plasticien mais dans la peinture canadienne.

François-Marc Gagnon

François-Marc Gagnon est le directeur de l'Institut de recherche en art canadien Gail et Stephen A. Jarislowsky. M. Gagnon est reconnu mondialement en tant que chercheur exceptionnel dans le domaine de la culture visuelle canadienne. Il a enseigné à l'Université de Montréal pendant 35 ans, et a aussi donné des cours magistraux au sein du programme d'études supérieures en histoire de l'art de l'Université Concordia. M. Gagnon est un chercheur prolifique qui a reçu la Médaille du Gouverneur général pour sa biographie critique de Paul-Émile Borduas, publiée en 1978.







Abstract painting by [illegible]
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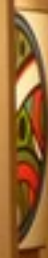
































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Review

Jean-Paul Jérôme in Review: Hard-Edge Heaven

GALERIE D'ESTE, MONTREAL SEP 4 TO 21 2008

by ISA TOUSIGNANT



Jean-Paul Jérôme *Les Relais Futures* 1996

“Meanwhile, across town” is how I’m tempted to start any article about things going on in Montreal’s Westmount neighbourhood. Not because it’s far from the city centre—certainly not, it takes 15 minutes to get there by metro from anywhere in the downtown core. Rather because in terms of art, it encompasses a certain amount of an alien otherness for me: moneyed, exclusive commercial galleries that contrast with the Belgo Building and Saint-Laurent scenes.

Amidst that landscape of saleable oil *paysages*, appetizing *corps exquis* and portraits of equine grandeur lies Galerie d’Este, a relatively new kid on the block. The fare breaks with the neighbourhood norm; within its walls on Greene Avenue there is a carefully chosen selection of contemporary works by artists that have warmed the cockles of owner Mark Liebner’s heart. Though generally figurative, the range of work is wide and includes names like Jean-Pierre Ruel, [Angela Grossmann](#), Sophie De Francesca, Ángel Mateo Charris, Zhang He, Paul Bourgault and Susan Szenes. Some artists are young; and some, like Jean-Paul Jérôme, whose retrospective there ended on September 21, are legendary.

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Jean-Paul Jérôme *Silhouettes* 1971

Jérôme (not to be confused with another influential Montrealer, Frère Jérôme) was born in 1928 and is remembered for being among the founders of Quebec's Plasticiens movement in 1955 alongside Jauran, Louis Belzile and Fernand Toupin. As eloquently expounded in the catalogue text by François-Marc Gagnon, the movement came on the heels of the Automatistes as a call to return art's focus to form (colour, shape, texture and line, otherwise known as the plastic elements) in order to achieve transcendental meaning. Jérôme's exploration of that principle took a variety of forms—the very gestural, muted and tonal paintings of the 1970s contrast sharply with the hard-edge, primary-colour paintings of the mid-80s on. The entire range was on view at Galerie d'Este.

As a sucker for hard-edge art my preferred period is the one that spanned from the 1980s to the artist's death in 2004. The 1990s were a particularly fruitful decade, producing such grandiose works as 1991's *Un monde de la sixtine*, which has the impact of a church window and the palette of a Robert Delaunay. Great slashing diagonals in white contrast with vibrant orange and blue circles and half-circles in this arch-shaped work. It is a moving example of the pervasive and very personal spirituality Jérôme injected into his work. He was a formalist, but for him, form equaled transcendence.



Jean-Paul Jérôme *Sirènes des rois* 1988

What Galerie d'Este wanted to achieve with a career-spanning show like this was to reposition Jérôme's work to a place more deserving of his importance within Quebec's canon. Jérôme was a reclusive, solitary

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artist, often overshadowed on the scene by his brasher, younger counterparts. Despite that, his formal and philosophical experimentations were significant, and his works, as this exhibition demonstrated, were the product of a focused, passionate and intelligent creator. (1329 ave Greene, Montreal QC)

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Jean-Paul Jérôme *La Ronde Marine* 1987

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Jean-Paul Jérôme: Plastic Fantastic

While the Automatistes tend to take the spotlight position in Canadian painting history, a lesser-known group of their Montreal-based contemporaries was equally poised at the vanguard of abstract painting. Jean-Paul Jérôme was one of these Plasticiens, who believed shape led to transcendental meaning.

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2011 RBC Canadian Painting Competition: On Your Marks! There's a lot of talent in the running for this year's RBC Canadian Painting Competition. Given the upward trajectory of past nominees, the 2011 semifinalists are worth a look now, and our slideshow dishes on where to see their work this summer and fall.

Catherine Crowston: Partner in Art Since its 2010 renovation, attendance at the Art Gallery of Alberta has skyrocketed from 22,000 to 111,000. In this article from our summer issue, critic Amy Fung looks at a key player in the AGA's rise: deputy director Catherine Crowston.

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